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AUTHOR Scott, Hugh J.
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ABSTRACT

Concerns and objections regarding minimum competency testing (MCT) are raised. The tests are criticized for their tendencies to: (1) deny variability in growth, development, and intelligence; (2) expose rather than constructively examine underachievers; (3) divert scarce personnel and financial resources to test administration; (4) ignore non-cognitive variables and factors outside school influence; (5) mislabel students; (6) justify homogeneous grouping; (7) over-emphasize the back-to-basics movement; (8) arouse racial prejudice by documenting underachievement of minorities; and (9) lower minimum standards in order to achieve an acceptable rate of success. Minimum competency tests are also described as being the most poorly conceived, and as providing the least useful information of all achievement tests. (CP)

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MINIMUM-COMPETENCY TESTING:
THE NEWEST OBSTRUCTION TO THE EDUCATION
OF BLACK AND OTHER DISADVANTAGED AMERICANS

by

Hugh J. Scott

ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, & Evaluation
Educational Testing Service Princeton, NJ 08541

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, & Evaluation
Educational Testing Service
Princeton, NJ 08541

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Preface

To address questions concerning the implications for minority groups of the movement toward minimum competency testing, Robert A. Feldmesser, a senior research sociologist at Educational Testing Service, organized a symposium at the 1979 meeting of the National Council of Measurement in Education. In recognition of the significance of the issue, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation encouraged and supported Dr. Feldmesser's efforts and agreed to publish the papers presented in order to bring them to the attention of a wide audience.

The following paper was one of those presented at the symposium. We hope that its appearance in print will sensitize the educational community and the general public to the issues involved and will stimulate discussion and a search for satisfactory solutions.

Barbara M. Wildemuth
Associate Director, ERIC/TM

MINIMUM-COMPETENCY TESTING: THE NEWEST OBSTRUCTION
TO THE EDUCATION OF BLACK AND OTHER DISADVANTAGED AMERICANS

Hugh J. Scott

Introduction

The black experience in America has conditioned black Americans to approach with considerable caution and apprehension proposals championed by white Americans that purport to bear benefits for black Americans. As Allen Ballard has reminded us, "No societal structure exists...without an ideological camouflage to mask its actual function" (2, p. 33). I do not believe that the majority of white educators and lay persons in the forefront of the push for minimum-competency testing (MCT) are racists. Unquestionably, among the white and black supporters of MCT are many who genuinely believe or hope that such testing will produce improvements in the education of black and other disadvantaged minority students. Nevertheless, many black and white educators with proven track records in the struggle for equality of educational opportunity and quality education for disadvantaged minorities are convinced that MCT is detrimental to students in general and highly destructive for minorities in particular.

After more than 20 years of practice in the education profession, I am prepared to accept almost any scheme that offers real potential for the elimination of race and socioeconomic conditions as the primary determinants of success or failure in school. My support is willingly and openly given to educational reforms directed to the eradication of mediocrity, ineptness, and insensitivity in the performance of teachers, administrators, and other practitioners. But I cannot jump on the MCT bandwagon. I consider MCT to be an ill-advised, inadequate, and inappropriate approach to mental measurement for white and black students. It will not facilitate improvements in teaching or in learning. The national push for and acceptance of MCT is a backward step in education and disregards improvements in tests and testing which took years to accomplish.

The initiation of statewide MCT programs and the "back to basics" movement are manifestations of an ever-increasing dissatisfaction among white Americans with the escalating costs and alleged deficiencies of public education. While most black Americans have never been satisfied with the quality of education provided for their children, the shift in mainstream America's confidence in and support for public education is a sharp departure from past positions and practices. But black Americans ought not to be deceived into believing that such dissatisfaction is motivated, in any significant measure, by a new-found concern among white Americans for the low quality of education most black Americans have historically received.

The words "back to" or "return to" in the basic-education movement imply that somewhere in the past, American schools did indeed place greater stress on the basics and that because of that stress students did perform satisfactorily

in the basic skills. Although not all educators are prepared to acknowledge that there has been a significant decline in performance levels on standardized achievement tests, I will not debate the allegation. But I do disagree with any claim that public or private education did indeed at some time in the nation's history respond effectively to the educational needs of blacks and other disadvantaged minorities. In terms of service to black students in particular, the schools have not moved from good to bad or even from average to poor. They have never been adequate. The notion that this nation once had good schools for its most disadvantaged citizens but has since let them deteriorate is false.

Joseph Alsop (1) has said that "if the worst racist in America set out to design a structure to keep the black man enchained, he could do no better than to use the present system of public education." The only modification I would make in that comment is to include private education as well. The overwhelming majority of black Americans would agree, I believe, that a white monopoly of public and private education has resulted in black Americans being the most poorly educated, the most severely impaired, and the most deliberately misinterpreted of all the major ethnic groups received by the nation's schools.

When Harold Howe of the Ford Foundation speaks of excellence in American education and declares (15), "I do not know a country with a population as diverse as ours and so tumultuous an educational history that is doing as well as we are," I can understand why, from his perspective as a member of the favored majority, he accords such praise to education in America. The majority of white Americans, especially middle-class white Americans, have been well served by the public schools, and the majority of black Americans have not. Yet even Howe acknowledges (15) that "there is plenty of room for improved practice in American schools, and some current evidence that particular aspects of schooling require special attention."

Evidently large numbers of white Americans are not convinced that they are well served by the public schools. Few subjects in a community generate more concern and discussion than the public schools; and with the possible exception of busing, no issues arouse this concern more than those of declining academic achievement and rising educational costs. Much of the criticism directed at public education has been provoked by reports that have highlighted a continuous decline in student performance in reading and mathematics as revealed by the results of standardized achievement tests.

A major focus of the public's push for accountability in education is directed to a return to the basics in education with a companion drive for the establishment of MCT programs in each state. On the subject of basics in education, the State Education Department of New York declared (20):

One of the most important responsibilities of the elementary and secondary schools is that of teaching young people to read with comprehension, to write effectively, and to make proper use of mathematical concepts and operations. The development of these three skills is so essential to the

attainment of other skills and the acquisition of knowledge that they are often referred to as the "basic skills."

Supporters of the back-to-basics movement are determined to measure how well the schools are doing in promoting the acquisition of the basic skills and to establish greater curricular emphasis on the basic skills.

Meanwhile, the national interest in MCT, which began in a few states in 1975 and 1976, has been considerable. Chris Pipho (22) reports that about two-thirds of the states have acted to set minimum-competency standards for elementary and/or secondary students and nearly all of the rest have an MCT program in the planning stage or are giving serious study to one. In fact, a mood of caution may already be setting in among state legislatures. Pipho notes that legislatures are now "moving much more carefully. They are holding more hearings; they are reviewing bills in greater detail...they are asking more questions."

Paul Parks, the former Secretary of Educational Affairs for the State of Massachusetts, has commented (21) on the many differences among MCT programs:

...it is important to understand that no two states have adopted identical testing programs...there are differences between states in the definition of minimal competencies, in the choice between nationally, state, or locally developed and administered standards and tests, in the grade levels at which the tests are to be administered, in the choice between criterion-referenced or norm-referenced tests, in the use of tests alone or in combination with other assessment tools, in the publicity that is to be given to test results at the classroom, school, school district and state levels, and in the provision for remedial instruction, curriculum reform and other remedial actions based on state or local test score analysis.

However, Arthur Wise has said (30) that the proponents of MCT hope to solve two problems: the devaluation of the high-school diploma, and the failure of a minority of students to acquire the basic skills and of a minority of teachers to teach them. Howe (15) places MCT programs under two broad headings: those designed to evaluate instructional programs or to give a composite picture of the need for remediation at the state and local levels and those designed either to determine whether students are to receive a diploma or to determine whether they are to be promoted to the next grade.

Tests and Testing

The emergence of MCT programs on a national scale has served to intensify the controversy that has historically surrounded the issues of the relevancy and validity of tests constructed to measure cognitive development. Educators trained in the complex specialty of mental measurement do have differences of

opinion as to what are appropriate uses and what are misuses of tests and test results. William Turnbull, president of Educational Testing Service, has stated (28): "Testing has undoubtedly suffered more from the excessive expectations of its most devoted advocates than from attacks of its critics." Esther Diamond (7) believes that the key issues in the controversy over tests and testing are quite familiar to educators: "Broadly defined, they concern the purpose of tests, the test content and what it measures; and the ways in which test results are presented, interpreted, and used."

Unfortunately, most lay persons and many educators do not understand or fully appreciate the fact that tests provide a limited range of information. As Turnbull has said (28):

Some people are let down on discovering that achievement tests fail to measure a variety of traits like honesty or leadership or social consciousness and in their disappointment over the fact that tests do not describe the whole person, they forget that tests do a rather good job of measuring the academic accomplishments they purport to measure.

Furthermore, Diamond (7) claims that "test content sometimes does reflect instances of bias--both cultural and sexual" and that "individuals have been erroneously labeled and relegated to a very narrow set of options" on the basis of their test scores.

Many of the tests developed in conjunction with MCT programs are criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced tests. Criterion-referenced tests provide information about how a student is doing in the acquisition of knowledge or a skill that has been agreed upon as important. Norm-referenced tests, on the other hand, provide information about how a student is doing in relation to other students. William Raspberry, syndicated columnist for the Washington Post, in remarks addressed primarily to opponents of norm-referenced tests, stated (24): "...whatever is wrong with tests, there are some things they can do. They can tell within limits how children in your home town stack up scholastically with children across town or across the country." But, Raspberry added, "Norm-referenced standardized achievement tests do not tell you what to do about low achievement nor do they prescribe remedies." Or, in Howe's phrase (15), "Norm-referenced tests take the temperature of the patient but give few hints about the disease or its diagnosis." Howe (17), in fact, traces much of the difficulty associated with mental measurement to the nature of the information produced by norm-referenced tests: "The kind of information we receive from norm-referenced tests could not be better designed for misunderstanding and misuse through public pressure on policy bodies."

Achievement tests of all kinds are so often routinely and mechanically used that many educators have stopped thinking about their limitations and benefits. Tests are among the most important evaluative and prognostic tools that educators have at their disposal, but improvements in their quality and

sensitivity have to be matched by gains in the ways in which they are selected and used. Educational goals and objectives should not be determined by tests, and test results do not provide the answers to major problems in education.

One of the most important complaints registered against achievement tests is the charge of cultural bias. "The test content and resulting norms reflect the dominant culture and are insensitive to differences in experiences, language, and cognitive style and the ways in which they might interact with test directions and test content"(7). Turnbull (27) contends that the charge of cultural bias is a false issue so far as most existing tests are concerned. Raspberry (24) concludes that everyone knows what cultural bias does: "It causes inner city blacks and other disadvantaged children to score poorly on intelligence, aptitude, and other achievement tests." Ebel (9) believes that "bias which accounts for poor test performance by some minorities is not in the test so much as it is in the culture, and thus another problem altogether." But Diamond (7) offers a different perspective: "Test bias and cultural or societal bias are not mutually exclusive."

Cultural influences will always be reflected in test construction and in test performance. The more acceptable, though still imperfect, achievement tests are those that give the most extensive consideration to the influences of socioeconomic factors in the construction of test design and test items. Specialists in mental measurement ought to be required to provide evidence that achievement tests are responsive to the fact that the human personality operates in environmental settings that both delay and quicken growth and development. Some tests do not effectively measure that which they purport to measure, and some tests are used to measure factors well beyond the scope of their design and intent. But achievement tests, in general, should not be opposed solely because they often reveal that disadvantaged minorities perform significantly below the results attained by the mainstream population.

Many achievement tests perform useful services when their prescribed usages and limitations are respected by educators, parents, and policymakers. Those achievement tests that are educationally most detrimental and culturally most biased are those that are geared to the sorting and labeling of students and that serve to stigmatize some students as inferior, to limit exposure and interaction among students with different labels, and to narrow the social and occupational options opened to students upon completion of school (18). Such tests contribute directly to a separation of children by social class within our schools.

Some Positive and Negative Aspects of MCT

American education ought to give considerable emphasis to the attainment of basic skills. The School Improvement Project in New York City, under the leadership of Ronald Edmonds, will "seek the means by which every public school in New York City can be made effective in teaching basic school skills to all children" (10). Edmonds will attempt to incorporate into the New York City

public schools those elements that his years of study of effective urban schools across the nation have revealed to be fundamental to the provision of quality educational experiences for students in an urban school environment. This project should avoid the excesses in school reform that have developed as a result of a combination of the return-to-basics and the MCT movements.

Perhaps the broadest criticism of this alliance is that these two approaches de-emphasize those activities in a school program that serve to humanize education. Schools should be evaluated by far more than simply changes in test scores. As Daniel L. Stufflebeam has said: "There are other variables that are terribly important and we ought to give students credit for development in those areas" (3).

John Fremer of Educational Testing Service has developed an interesting list of what educators have identified as positive and negative aspects of MCT (12). Three of the eight areas of impact in Fremer's list are sufficient to highlight the sharp differences in educational philosophy between the proponents and opponents of MCT:

	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Negative</u>
<u>Students</u>	Early identification of need Clear goals Provision of remediation Monitoring of progress More attention to basic skills Meaningful diploma	Negative label Restriction of options in school Denial of diploma Reduction of post-secondary opportunities
<u>Teachers</u>	Instructional management information Clear goals In-service training--remediation, measurement Supplementary aid More opportunities for individualized instruction	Unrealistic assignments Loss of jobs Loss of freedom Parental pressure Law suits
<u>Curriculum, Instruction, and School Climate</u>	Clearer statement of objectives and priorities Focus on applications Increase in emphasis on writing More extensive remedial options Increased emphasis on standards Better match of students and programs	Restriction of curriculum Cram books and coaching Divisiveness inside of school Strong limits on innovation

Eugene R. Howard of the Colorado State Department of Education believes that competency-based education can increase student motivation and contribute to the individualization of instruction. But Howard has identified some "traps" that he perceives as hidden in the movement for competency-based instruction: (14)

1. Further strengthening of state control at the expense of local control
2. Trivializing of curriculum and confusing of minimum standards with maximums
3. Failure to provide remedial instruction for students who fail all or parts of minimum competency tests
4. Permitting students to leave school early on the basis of test results.

Minimum-performance levels geared to the intellectual potential of the average student would not represent a challenge for students of superior intellectual potential. On the other hand, such performance levels would be too demanding for students who are identified as low or "dull normal" in their intellectual potential. Minimum levels of proficiency in the basic skills can be set so high that they are unrealistic for large numbers of students. In short, it may well be impracticable to establish minimum-competency standards for a widely heterogeneous group of students in a classroom or a grade level. The imposition of minimum standards that are uniformly applied to all students in a given class or grade level is inconsistent and irreconcilable with what is known about the range of intellectual potential that exists in classrooms and schools.

The establishment of minimum-performance levels in the basic skills as a requirement for graduation, or for the receipt of a diploma, raises the issue of how the required minimum proficiencies relate to desirable maximums. If the minimum-performance levels required by law or regulation are not being achieved by significant numbers of students, how do school systems cope with the very real possibility that teachers and administrators will allow the minimums to serve as maximums? Parks (21) expresses the concern that school personnel will be so influenced by external pressures that the minimums will be continually reduced:

In order to permit most students to pass and therefore to graduate...most of the existing deficiencies will not in fact be reported or perhaps even measured by these tests. Instead, the norm for passing purposes will simply be scaled down to a level of achievement that is equal to that level of learning already achieved by most students in the group that is being tested.

The National Academy of Education's Committee on Testing and Basic Skills has made these comments on the possible social, economic, and educational consequences of poor performance on minimum-competency tests: (16)

The checking of minimal competencies may only be the measuring of accumulated deficits. The consequences upon those who do not pass must be assessed. If success on tests (for purposes of graduation or promotion) is achieved by 4/5ths of a suburban school system, but only 1/3 of a central-city system, the consequences could be serious for domestic tranquility as well as social equity in a world where a high school diploma, regardless of intrinsic meaning, is frequently a ticket to particular jobs.

The negative effects of MCT weigh most heavily upon those who fail to pass the tests. Blacks and other disadvantaged minorities repeatedly score lower than other students on norm-referenced achievement tests and can be expected to display this same pattern on minimum-competency tests. What do you do with or for students--black and white--who have not passed, perhaps cannot pass, minimum levels of proficiency? How many chances should such students get, and do you lower standards so that they can pass? Henry Brickell (4) has raised some similar, very critical questions about factors to be considered in the establishment of MCT programs: "What competencies, how to measure, when to measure, one minimum or many, how high the minimum, minimums for students or for schools, and what to do with the incompetents?" Although Brickell proposes possible answers to each of these questions, the questions themselves underscore the complexities that rise to the surface when this use of achievement tests is considered.

Some Critical Educational Needs

In my own compilation of a list of critical educational needs, I could not in good conscience include the need for additional documentation of which categories of students do not perform at acceptable levels of proficiency on standardized achievement tests. There is no need to develop additional instruments to demonstrate that students who are the victims of adverse discrimination and other forms of disadvantage achieve in our schools at performance levels much lower than those students for whom environmental supports facilitate human growth and development. Educators and informed lay persons are not in the dark when it comes to the identification of those who are the most persistent underachievers. The need and challenge are in the development of ways and means to cope effectively with the remediation of cumulative deficiencies in basic skills and to conquer their causes.

The range of abilities within any school system is tremendous, and the wider that range is, the greater the demand on the skills of school personnel and the higher the cost of education. Students who are the least expensive to educate and the least difficult to teach constitute the majority in most school systems, but this is not true in many systems that have large numbers of black and other disadvantaged students. Such school systems, in particular, need to know much more about why students are not performing at acceptable levels and what can be done to make teaching and learning more effective. MCT is a

misguided utilization of a school system's financial and personnel resources. While it would generate more precise information on the deficiency levels of individual students, no diagnostic information would be collected. It offers no valuable indications as to how teaching and learning can be improved. If the accent on failure in school held any promise for stimulating educators and students to improve performance, they would have years ago been shamed into achieving at higher levels of performance.

MCT programs are imposed on the many but are in fact designed to identify the relatively small percentage of students in most school systems who do not perform at minimum levels of proficiency in the basic skills. Unless the minimum floors are set at levels which are completely contrary to any commonly accepted definition of "minimum," the vast majority of students in most school systems will satisfactorily complete minimum-competency tests. While some school systems may be graduating students who are functional illiterates, there is no evidence to support the contention that most students who graduate from the nation's public and private schools would not be able to pass minimum-competency tests. Even in school systems with large numbers of disadvantaged minority students where children score significantly below the national norms on standardized achievement tests, there is no reason to doubt that most students in such systems would perform satisfactorily on minimum-competency tests. MCT is a heavy-handed approach to the identification of the relatively small numbers of students in most school systems who cannot pass minimum-level proficiency standards in reading and mathematics.

There is no school district in this nation serving a large black student population that is not suffering from constraints imposed by grossly inadequate funds for critical programs and services. In those school districts where the scope and complexity of educational problems and needs are the most severe, insufficient revenue is the standard reason given for the denial of requests for funds to improve or expand critical programs and services. If school systems that serve large numbers of students from disadvantaged environments are ever to compensate for the socioeconomic deprivation their students have suffered, they must receive far more than an equal allocation of funds for programs and services. The quality and quantity of a school system's resources should be in direct proportion to the degree of severity of the educational needs of its students.

White Americans control the determination of funding levels for school systems that are heavily or predominantly black and far too many of them remain reluctant to support the provision of essential instructional services to school systems that are "too black" in student population. If along with the identification and indictment aspects of MCT programs were accompanied by additional funds to cope with deeply rooted and complex educational problems, the conceptual shortcomings of the programs would be less repugnant. But white America is registering too many complaints about the escalating costs of education to support significant increases in funding for predominantly black school systems. MCT will spur accusatory declarations rather than additional funding for heavily black school systems with severe needs.

The rapidity and scope of public acceptance of a return to the basics in education and of MCT are not the results of a full exploration of the critical issues underlying the two movements. Some proponents of both movements have capitalized on the public's anxieties about the alleged crisis in public education. Not often in the history of public education in this nation has so little been stretched so far in such a short span of time. I am hopeful that when the back-to-basics and MCT movements receive greater scrutiny, changes will be made to reduce their negative consequences or terminations which end the programs altogether.

Some Questions that Ought to be Addressed

Here are some of the questions that ought to be addressed in the consideration of proposals for back-to-basics and MCT:

1. In the formulating of the essential elements of the basics in education, what consideration ought to be given to the fact that schools serve students who truly have exceptional needs related to physical, psychological, and intellectual handicaps?
2. In the formulating of the essential elements of the basics in education, what consideration ought to be given to the fact that, in a heterogeneous school population, some students will exhibit abilities that are close to the norm and others abilities that vary widely from it?
3. In the formulating of the essential elements of the basics in education, what consideration ought to be given to critical areas of non-cognitive development?
4. How can equitable and reasonably challenging minimum competencies be defined for student populations which differ in their life experiences and in their innate capacities to respond to such experiences?
5. In constructing of minimum competencies, what consideration ought to be given to the influence of variables outside the control of the school that may detract from the effectiveness of teaching and learning?
6. In the development of an MCT program, what consideration ought to be given to worthwhile objectives that cannot be achieved within a school year or are not measured by the tests?
7. Will MCT narrow the range of a school's curriculum, and thus erode the concepts of cultural pluralism and social diversity, by attaching no priority to qualities not measured by the tests?

8. What additional significant information will MCT programs provide that is not presently being provided by tests which are not predicated on minimum competencies?
9. What influence should tests and test results have on the formulation of educational goals and objectives?
10. What safeguards ought to be established to prevent tracking, labeling, and denial of access for students who do not perform on minimum-competency tests at levels consistent with minimal floors?
11. Will MCT programs contribute to the broad purpose of improving student performance in the acquisition of the basic skills?
12. Will statewide MCT programs be the prelude to national achievement testing?
13. What influence should test results from MCT programs have on a state's allocation of funds for regular and compensatory programs to local school districts?
14. What influence should MCT test results have on the retention or promotion of students and the formulation of judgments about effectiveness of curriculum and of teacher performance?
15. Will MCT programs contribute to improvements in student performance and/or teacher effectiveness?

Some Criticisms of MCT

Florida has the most extensive statewide MCT program. A panel convened by the National Education Association and the Florida Teaching Profession--NEA and chaired by Ralph Tyler recently concluded that the state's strategy for achieving educational accountability was not the most likely to be effective. The panel indicated that many of the shortcomings of Florida's MCT program resulted from "rushing into the establishment of a program without considering all of the important aspects of it and without developing adequate communication with those chiefly affected." The following were among the criticisms made by the panel: some items on the tests were not commonly taught in the schools; cut-off scores were apparently established arbitrarily; students and parents were not given adequate warning; local schools were not given enough technical assistance; minority students and students with special learning needs had been harmed; and in some communities teachers were being blamed for poor performance of students. (19)

Perhaps the most common criticism of MCT programs is that they do not give appropriate recognition to the fact that there is much more to a child's education than that which can be readily quantified. Norman R. Dixon (8) has expressed alarm at what he considers the widespread and often harmful impact

produced by schools' overdependency on achievement tests--tests, which, he charges, "have acquired tyrannical power over the lives of students and frequently contort classes into blanching exercises in the acquisition of fact." Similarly, John Goodlad (13) has said that "good grades in school are not productive of...human qualities of compassion, happiness, appreciation of others, good work habits, integrity..."

Conclusion

Human behavior does not lend itself readily to simple categorization. Numerous variables combine to contribute to the formulation of an identifiable pattern of human behavior. The variables tend to differ in their mixture and to fluctuate in their respective dominance from one situation to another. These fluctuations produce difficulties in predicting, shaping, and assessing desirable and undesirable patterns of behavior.

An urgent need exists for the development of a systematic approach to instruction capable of providing a reliable rationale for explaining the progress or lack of progress of each student. Standards that are clear and equitably formulated are essential to a sound approach to education and to the realization of the purposes of education. But standards ought not to be used to justify the perpetuation of injustices and inequities in the grouping, grading, and promotion of students. While the importance of standards should be underscored, equal concern should be given to ascertaining, as Alice Houston (19) has put it, "whether or not we are providing systematic, procedural safeguards to assure the success of students. Are we managing instruction so that strengths and weaknesses are assessed, with immediate attention given to helping students master the necessary skills?" Education ought to emphasize assistance rather than rejection, success rather than failure.

Educators in heavily black school systems have enough problems trying to cope with the uses and misuses of the more traditional forms of achievement tests without heaping upon them the burdens and disadvantages of minimum-competency tests. These tests generate types of information that promote public misunderstanding and are subject to misuse by policy-making bodies. Paul Parks (21) seems justified in saying, "The promise of minimal competency testing is illusory, and the reality harmful rather than helpful." Harold Howe (15) has raised "the difficult question of whether the national mood for improving basic skills performance has hidden within it overtones of racism" --a question which I believe can be answered in the affirmative. Norman Dixon (8) was more forthright when he expressed concern about "the desire of many citizens and educators to procreate an intellectual elite...and the confirmation tests give to racists who believe that blacks are innately inferior to whites."

Perhaps the choice is between the assessment of a student made by a teacher and the assessment made by a test. In the case of minimum competencies, I prefer to put my faith in teachers. Most teachers want to teach effectively and want their students to learn; there are more good teachers than there are

good tests; and good teachers use test results wisely. But an inadequate or inappropriate test, by itself, can pollute the entire system.

The conceptual deficiencies of MCT as well as the potential negative consequences which it may very well engender are sufficient reasons for broad opposition within the education profession. MCT should not be allowed to become a black-white issue; destructive testing programs of this sort have adverse impact on all students, irrespective of race.

In summary, these are my objections to MCT programs, with particular reference to their effects on disadvantaged minority students:

1. Minimum-competency tests are the most poorly conceived and provide the least useful information of all the various forms of achievement tests.
2. Minimal performance standards applied to all students in a particular classroom or grade level are contradictory to contemporary knowledge about the variability in patterns of human growth and development and about variability in the range of intellectual potential that exists in a classroom or a grade level.
3. MCT programs often are geared more to an expose of underachievement in the schools to "stir the laggards" than to a constructive examination of the underachiever.
4. The personnel and financial resources of school systems with large numbers of disadvantaged minority students which are already critically inadequate, would be diverted to the implementation of the various aspects of MCT with no significant contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning.
5. MCT programs give no attention to the importance of non-cognitive variables and to the influence of variables outside the control of the school that may detract from the effectiveness of teaching and learning.
6. Minimum-competency tests lend themselves more readily than other tests to the mislabeling of students and to the restriction of options for students.
7. Test results from MCT programs, more often than not, will be cited as justification for a return to homogeneous grouping, which will lead to the separation of students by social class, and by race in those school systems in which black students constitute the largest number of students from low-income families.
8. MCT programs, with their integral ties to the back-to-basics movement, will exert a restrictive influence on educational goals and

objectives, especially in school systems with large numbers of minority students, and will be a factor in the elimination or reduction of courses and programs that make school more enjoyable and conducive to learning, because of the low priority accorded to qualities not measured by minimum-competency tests.

9. MCT programs, by the documentation of underachievement in the basic skills by minority students, will arouse the prejudices of racists and others who are unsympathetic to the problems and needs of the disadvantaged.
10. Particularly detrimental to the education of minorities is the strong probability that minimum floors will eventually become the general educational standards and that pressures to have students satisfy minimum standards will result in a widespread lowering of all standards.

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